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1955/06/14

209. **Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Sebald) to the Secretary of State¹**

Washington, June 14, 1955.

SUBJECT

Viet-Nam

Discussion

Conditions have changed somewhat during the past couple of months when our basic thinking on elections in Viet-Nam was developed. This memorandum and attachments set out some of these changes and recommend a revised position for your approval.

As I see it, one of our basic objectives in Viet-Nam is to prevent the Communists from winning any kind of elections whereby they would take over control of all Viet-Nam by political and legal means. We would not object to an indefinite but ostensibly temporary division of Viet-Nam as presently constituted. The logical corollary of this policy is that neither side would undertake military operations to try to conquer the other. The real considerations then in such a policy are whether the Geneva signatories will condone a divided Viet-Nam, whether the Communists will resort to arms to obtain control of all Viet-Nam, and what means we have for carrying out our policy with the best chance of success.

Our preliminary position on free elections in Viet-Nam assumed the Communist bloc would never agree to genuinely free elections in Germany, Korea or Viet-Nam. There are some slight warnings that this assumption may no longer hold true and in any event should be critically tested. It is conceivable that the Soviets might change their position on Germany and perhaps even on Korea. If they did, they might certainly come out strongly for free elections in Viet-Nam where they might have at this stage a much better chance for winning than in Korea or Germany. It therefore appears necessary for us to enlarge the scope of our position on elections so that it can accommodate political developments in free Viet-Nam and better provide an opportunity to achieve our objectives.

Our preliminary views on elections also assumed that the Diem Government would go through with consultations with the Viet Minh beginning on July 20, 1955, make no trouble over the Geneva Accords, and advocate generally free elections with adequate safeguards, etc. This assumption is no longer true. Diem will not be bound by the Geneva Accords. He presently opposes consultations or

¹Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751G.00/6-1455. Secret. Drafted by Young and approved in draft by Phleger, MacArthur, Bowie, and Tyler.

statements on elections until he has secured certain military agreements from the French and until a National Assembly has been formed. These conditions of his have much merit and permit us to shift somewhat the basis for our position. This is suggested in the attached position paper.

In essence our position would be that the whole subject of consultations and elections in Viet-Nam should be left up to the Vietnamese themselves and not dictated by external agreements which one of the parties never accepted and still rejects. We would continue to stand on the U.S. declaration at Geneva and continue to favor genuinely free elections for unification. The position of the Vietnamese Government would be greatly strengthened if it had the backing and the opinion of a National Assembly. This position would be strictly in keeping with the fundamental doctrine of "consent of the governed". The U.S. cannot be a party to political acts or decisions which do not reflect the will of the people validly ascertained and expressed.

This leaves the question of possible resumption of hostilities by the Viet Minh on any pretext over the failure to open consultations on July 20 or failure to come to an agreement on the unification of Viet-Nam. The current "peace offensive" of International Communism makes Viet Minh renewal of hostilities improbable but the U.S. should be prepared for such an eventuality. We should know how far the U.S. will go in backing up Diem. We should be able to tell him that, if he takes a strong position advocating genuinely free elections, the U.S. would come to his side with military support if the Viet Minh should resort to aggression. We will also have to face up to the possibility in the next month or two that the Viet Minh will exert a tremendous pressure on Free Viet-Nam through threats and terrorism. We should also be able to give Diem some assurances of support in this contingency. This whole matter is now the subject of a review within the NSC.

There may be additional difficulties in our position. The growing strength of Diem and the Nationalist forces will compel the Viet Minh to revise their entire strategy and tactics on Viet-Nam. If the French reject Diem's position, it may bring about a serious cleavage between them which will raise a critical policy problem for the U.S. The French may even demand or try to bring about the replacement of Diem. The British and Indians may also oppose the above position and Diem's policy.

Recommendation

It is recommended that you approve the attached position papers on (a) consultations and elections, and (b) the status of the French Expeditionary Corps, and the French High Command in Viet-Nam.²

{Tab A}

VIET-NAM, CONSULTATIONS AND ELECTIONS

Anticipated French and British Position

(a) They are primarily concerned now over getting consultations organized with the Viet Minh beginning on July 20. The French aide-mémoire May 23³ urged a tripartite agreement for presentation to the Vietnamese in four-power conference in Saigon.

(b) French will oppose Diem's position of delay. They may also oppose negotiations with Vietnamese over FEC as a prior condition to consultations with the Viet Minh.

(c) The British will side with the French and urge strict compliance with Geneva Accords.

Vietnamese Position

1. Diem has not declared himself finally on consultations or elections. His present position appears to be:

(a) He and his government did not sign the Geneva Accords and protested them. Therefore he feels he is not legally bound by the provisions on elections, and will dissociate Free Viet-Nam completely from the Accords. He does not feel compelled to meet with the Viet Minh beginning on July 20th.

(b) Free Viet-Nam cannot consider the question of consultations and elections until after a National Assembly has been elected and convoked, and has declared its views. He has no mandate to talk with the Viet Minh about elections until he has the backing of some representative body.

(c) The status and responsibilities of the French Expeditionary Corps and the French High Command must first be settled before determining his policy on consultations and elections. Free Viet-Nam must have unquestioned and complete sovereignty prior to adopting any public position on free elections.

²There is a marginal note on the source text indicating that Dulles saw this memorandum and a check indicating that the recommendation in this memorandum was approved.

³A summary of what was more accurately described as the French "informal paper" of May 23, is in telegram 5104 from Paris, May 23. (Department of State, Central Files, 751G.00/5-2355)

(d) While the principle of genuine and adequate safeguards for elections is acceptable, international pressures may compel the Vietnamese to compromise with the Viet Minh and so lose Free Viet-Nam. Diem reportedly believes the U.S. will back him in insisting on full safeguards for truly free elections but is doubtful of British and French support if the Viet Minh offer seemingly reasonable counter-proposals.

U.S. Position

1. We sympathize with Diem's position outlined above which seems logically and morally correct. He has not rejected the concept of free national elections. He is only registering a desire to proceed differently than prescribed at Geneva and with assurance of a popular and legal mandate from the free Vietnamese. Diem seems in a strong position to make these claims.

2. We will continue to urge Diem to take a vigorous public stand in favor of genuinely free elections for Viet-Nam with all necessary safeguards to ensure a true expression of the will of the people. However, we will not press him to begin consultations on July 20 if he can claim valid reasons for following another course and obtain Vietnamese support in his stand. Paragraph 7 of the Geneva Declaration does not seem to us to be a binding requirement to begin consultations exactly on the day of July 20, 1955.

3. We should tell Diem:

(a) His attitude will provoke strong international pressures from the ICC, the UK, France and the Communists, on both Free Viet-Nam and the U.S. to implement the provisions of the Geneva settlement.

(b) If the Vietnamese find themselves alone on this issue and if they appear to be the violators of the Geneva Accords, the U.S. Government would be put in a very difficult position to come to their aid should the Viet Minh attack. U.S. public opinion might find support hard to justify if it seems Diem is against free elections.

(c) Should the Viet Minh now oppose Diem's position with strong terroristic action throughout the South, possibly including semi-military operations, Free Viet-Nam's capability for counter-action would be less this year than probably will be a year from now.

4. We believe Diem will have considerable support in Viet-Nam and the U.S. for his stand. Our own position on free elections would stand greater chances of implementation if the Vietnamese Government had the firm backing of a National Assembly before and during negotiations with the Viet Minh. This might also reduce the effectiveness of Viet Minh pressures.

5. We recognize that Diem's postponement of contacts with the Viet Minh in the South might engender very serious Communist counter-actions—possibly including renewed terrorism in the South

and open rebellion and guerrilla warfare by Communist elements, and conceivably even resumption of hostilities across the 17th Parallel. There is also the problem of ICC and Indian diplomatic pressures, as well as that of the signatories of the Geneva Declaration. All these parties will probably reject Diem's position because of the very serious risks inherent in it. However, we believe on balance the position of the free world would be stronger if Diem's plan were supported rather than frustrated:

(a) There probably will be pressures upon the Viet Minh by Moscow and Peiping to avoid actions which might precipitate world conflict;

(b) Viet Minh capabilities in South—while great—are probably insufficient at this time to overthrow the Free Viet-Nam regime without direct Viet Minh military support from across the 17th Parallel;

(c) Diem's position will be approved by the majority of his nationalist supporters in the South, and his courageous resistance to Viet Minh blandishments and threats may well make him increasingly popular and hence strong;

(d) We believe that if Diem now can develop wide popular support for his position on elections he might be in a better position later to resist pressures from the British, French and Indians to accept what will probably seem to be "reasonable" Communist proposals for elections, although in fact such proposals would be cleverly designed to deliver all Viet-Nam to the Viet Minh.

[Tab B]

THE STATUS OF FEC AND THE FRENCH HIGH COMMAND IN VIET-NAM

Anticipated French Position

1. The French will probably seek our views in the light of the Vietnamese request of June 6 for negotiations on this subject. The French reaction is not yet definitely known.

2. However, French might react negatively to the Vietnamese proposal for negotiations and to the Vietnamese desire for a military agreement defining the responsibilities of the FEC and the French High Command in Viet-Nam. On the other hand, the French may not oppose Vietnamese desire for total withdrawal French ground forces and retention of only naval and air forces. However, the French may ask us to permit withdrawal of two squadrons of B-26's to Algeria, which would nullify the Vietnamese desire to retain some French air power.

3. The Acting French Commander in Chief, Saigon, has informed our Embassy that all French forces are now concentrated in the area of Saigon and Cap St. Jacques except for a battalion of "symbolic value" near the 17th Parallel. Presumably the French intend to continue to concentrate the FEC far in the South rather than maintain forces near the 17th Parallel to deter or meet aggression.

United States Position

1. In general, it is better from the political viewpoint for France and the free world if France negotiates with the Vietnamese regarding the status of the FEC and French High Command in Free Viet-Nam rather than to face nationalistic demands for an immediate and necessarily precipitate withdrawal of all French forces.

2. We hope the French will accept the Vietnamese request for negotiations in a friendly and constructive spirit and the negotiations will be quickly and effectively concluded in an agreement. Such negotiations would enhance the Vietnamese position. We see much political advantage in having the command responsibilities clarified so that there would be no doubt that the Government of Viet-Nam is fully responsible for internal security in Free Viet-Nam and is not dependent upon an outside power.

3. We would think that pursuant to Article IV of the Manila Pact and its Protocol France could negotiate a status of forces agreement with Viet-Nam regulating the responsibilities, obligations and location of residual French forces for the purpose of joint undertakings in meeting external aggression against Free Viet-Nam and a threat to the treaty area of a Viet Minh attack.

4. From a political point of view it would seem advisable for the concentration of French forces in the Saigon area to be reduced or eliminated in an orderly manner as soon as possible. The French Prime Minister made this suggestion during the Paris talks and the Secretary of State concurred. It would be preferable for majority of residual French ground forces to be stationed near the 17th Parallel if the FEC is to retain any deterrent effect whatsoever.

5. If the Government of Viet-Nam desires the total withdrawal of French ground forces, the U.S. would not object. The Vietnamese Government is in a stronger internal position than two months ago. The increasing political liabilities of the presence of French forces in Viet-Nam may outweigh the military advantages, which were previously anticipated. If the French Government accepts this Vietnamese proposal, the U.S. would hope it would be carried out in an orderly manner and that French instructors would remain as an essential element in reorganizing, training, and providing logistic support for Vietnamese armed forces. At the same time there would be no political reason for opposing the retention, as a deterrent, of a small nucleus

of French ground forces with adequate air support stationed near the 17th Parallel for patrolling the demarcation line and occupying strategic or tactical bases in that area.

6. As to command relationships between French and Vietnamese, this is a matter for them to work out on the basis of the best possible mutual relationships by joint Vietnamese-French arrangements. If the responsibilities for external defense are settled, we see no need for the French to hold the position of commander in chief over Vietnamese forces, except in the event of aggression.

210. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Reinhardt) to the Department of State¹

No. 453

Saigon, June 15, 1955.

SUBJECT

Conversation with Diem Concerning Agrarian Reform Program and Related Matters.

There is enclosed, for the Department's information, a memorandum of conversation held on June 1, 1955, between Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem and USOM consultant, W. I. Ladejinsky.² Mr. Ladejinsky has been following closely the agrarian reform program in Vietnam and had come to see the Prime Minister, at the latter's invitation, to discuss recent developments in the program.

In addition to the question of land reform, the conversation touched on the problem of the resettlement of refugees, the ineffectiveness of the local civil administration, and recent political developments including the sect problem. As in earlier conversations, Diem continued to give the impression of viewing the various economic, social, and administrative programs discussed as subordinate to the immediate political and military problems with which he was engaged. The Prime Minister appeared serene and confident, and expressed his conviction that the Hoa Hao rebellion would be successfully dealt with. His attitude toward the French continued to be critical, but he appeared considerably less bitter than in the past.

Randolph A. Kidder
for

G. Frederick Reinhardt

¹Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751G.00/6-1555. Confidential. Drafted by John A. McKesson III, Second Secretary of Embassy.

²Wolf I. Ladejinsky had the title of Land Reform Adviser.